



jigsaw puzzle: a puzzle consisting of small irregularly cut pieces that are to be fitted together to form a picture

MILTON AVERY—PUZZLE MASTER

The American modern painter dovetailed personal visual talents with universal design principles



Nude In Black Robe, Milton Avery, 1950. Oil on canvas.

ON A SCALE OF ZERO-10, how well did Milton Avery grasp this core concept of modern art: A painting presents an arrangement of shapes on a canvas?

10.

He took to heart what French painter Maurice Denis summed up during the throws of Post-Impressionism in 1890: "It should be remembered that a picture—before being a warhorse, a nude, or an anecdote of some sort—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."

Through relaxed precision, Avery covered his canvases with pretty and gritty color shapes that fit together like a jigsaw.

Call Avery "The Puzzle Master."

Just look at the six shapes he used in 1954 to make *Green Sea*.



Green Sea, Milton Avery, 1954. Oil on canvas.

And note especially the cranky black-forest shape he whipped up at the bottom of the painting, which interlocks with two other equally funky shapes, the light-blue shore and pale-green sea. Through these three rebel-shapes, Avery counterpointed the calm of the painting's top two-thirds, where he neatly dovetailed three large wedges—off-white sky, raw-umber mountain, and olive-green sea or meadow. And if you have any doubt that shapes were on his mind as Avery painted: Two years earlier, he even called one of his paintings, *Shapes of Spring*.



Shapes of Spring, Milton Avery, 1952. Oil on canvas.

Avery borrowed the concept of "painting as puzzle shapes" from Synthetic Cubism, a period of painting between 1912 and 1914 when Picasso, Braque, Gris, and other artists took a deep look into new aspects of visual composition and shape-making.

And in his best paintings, Avery distilled the lessons of Synthetic Cubism—as well as the Synthetic-Cubist-inspired shape-making research of Matisse (oh, and the fountainhead-research of Cézanne, to whose paintings we can trace the origin of these ideas—see footnote). Avery created colorful, whimsical paintings of people, rooms, and nature—semi-abstract paintings spirited by simplicity, clarity, lyricism, serenity, and play. And he did so by organizing the shapes of his jigsaw puzzle according to a clear design principle: the co-dependence of form and space. Avery made the fluid, organic shapes of his paintings function not only as space-occupiers, but also as space-definers, thereby rendering his special galaxy of shapes not only in the service of what critic Clive Bell called, in 1914, "Significant Form," but also in service of what I call (as an architect and painter), "**Significant Space**."

Take, for example, Avery's 1950 painting *Nude in Black Robe*.

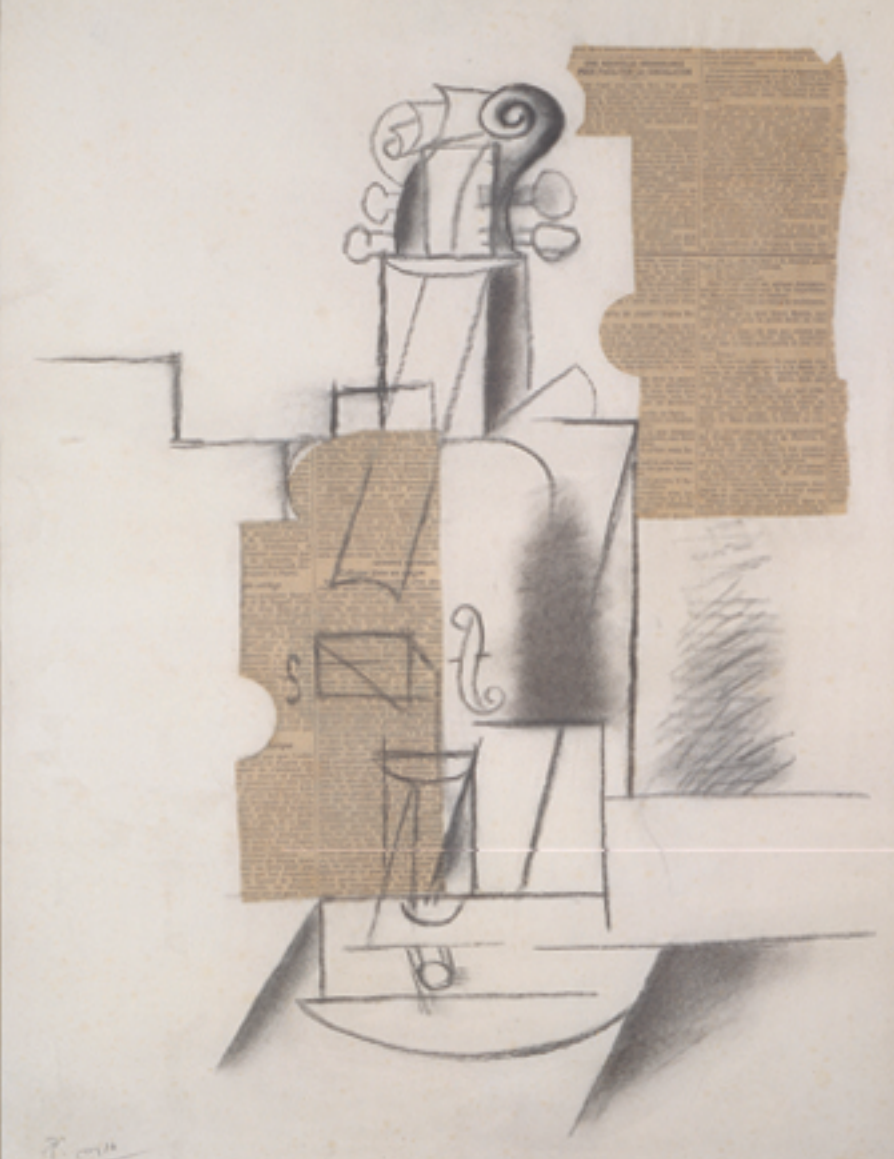


Through five basic color-shapes, Avery creates an elegant form-space world brimming with artistic import that extends far beyond the literal representation of a woman's form. The "subject" of the painting, Avery insists, both through the painting's title and arrangement, is as much the black robe, to whose paintings we can trace the origin of these ideas—see footnote). Avery created colorful, whimsical paintings of people, rooms, and nature—semi-abstract paintings spirited by simplicity, clarity, lyricism, serenity, and play. And he did so by organizing the shapes of his jigsaw puzzle according to a clear design principle: the co-dependence of form and space. Avery made the fluid, organic shapes of his paintings function not only as space-occupiers, but also as space-definers, thereby rendering his special galaxy of shapes not only in the service of what critic Clive Bell called, in 1914, "Significant Form," but also in service of what I call (as an architect and painter), "**Significant Space**."

two herky-jerky shapes that flank the nude, as the nude, whose shape looks smoother and more "natural" by contrast. Think of the dark robe as Significant Form and the light nude as Significant Space. Or vice versa. Yes, that takes some imagination. But it's the kind of imagination that artists use to create works. (And you know how in a movie theater, you have to put on 3D glasses to watch a 3D film or it looks fuzzy? Same idea when you look at a painting—you have to put on your "abstract glasses" or you won't see the painting clearly, deeply.) Let's unpack the story of these three shapes, the nude and two-piece black robe, all wrestling for the visual upper hand against a calm background of two gray shapes (one light, the other medium). Let's zoom in on the nude and the robe's three-way conversation and appreciate more fully the painting's special design—its balance of the geometric and eccentric, its blend of control and soul.

Squint your eyes, and enjoy the creativity of those two oddball black shapes! Their inner contours sculpt the nude. But their outer contours? What's going on there?! Billowing and angular at the same time, the outer contours of those two black shapes take on a life of their own. But their design isn't without rhyme (they do) or reason. Avery hints that reciprocal qualities of size and shape knit them together. In terms of size, one piece of the robe is major (the left shape), and one piece is minor (the right shape). In terms of shape, their right contours hint at a jigsaw-puzzle connection. Let me explain.

Avery took a page from Picasso. Look at what Picasso did in this collage in 1912 called, *The Violin*.



The Violin, Pablo Picasso, 1912. Collage on canvas.

Picasso cut a square of newspaper into two jigsaw pieces then positioned them to create a composition as much about the art of form-making and space-making as about the art of depicting a violin. See how the left outlines of the two newspaper pieces echo each other—in reverse? Mentally flip the upper right piece on its horizontal axis then slide that piece to the left and down. Now snap the two pieces back together. Voila! Through his split-newspaper duet, Picasso created a visual system of interlocking positive and negative shapes. And he framed a violin that looks more void than solid—more empty than full. More space than form!

Likewise, Avery's two black robe shapes frame a woman who appears less like a solid object than an empty space. And though the two robe shapes have a less explicit jigsaw-puzzle relationship than Picasso's two newspaper pieces, we get the idea: The two shapes of the black robe, which foreshadow the exotic contour of the black forest in *Green Sea*, do a form-space do-si-do. They dance! Not only with each other, but also with the other simple shapes around them. And aspects of the robe's right contours (the right sides of the robe's two shapes) hint at the robe's unity, reminding us that the robe (like Picasso's newspaper) is visually split, but conceptually whole. Just flip the right piece of the robe on its horizontal axis. Then snap the two pieces together like a puzzle. Not a perfect match. But close enough for jazz.

So when I look at an Avery painting, what do I see?

I see how his exquisite color harmonies blend with his form-space mastery, how form and space go hand-in-hand—how Avery gives the positive forms no more weight and play than the negative spaces. I see how improvisation and calculation mix.

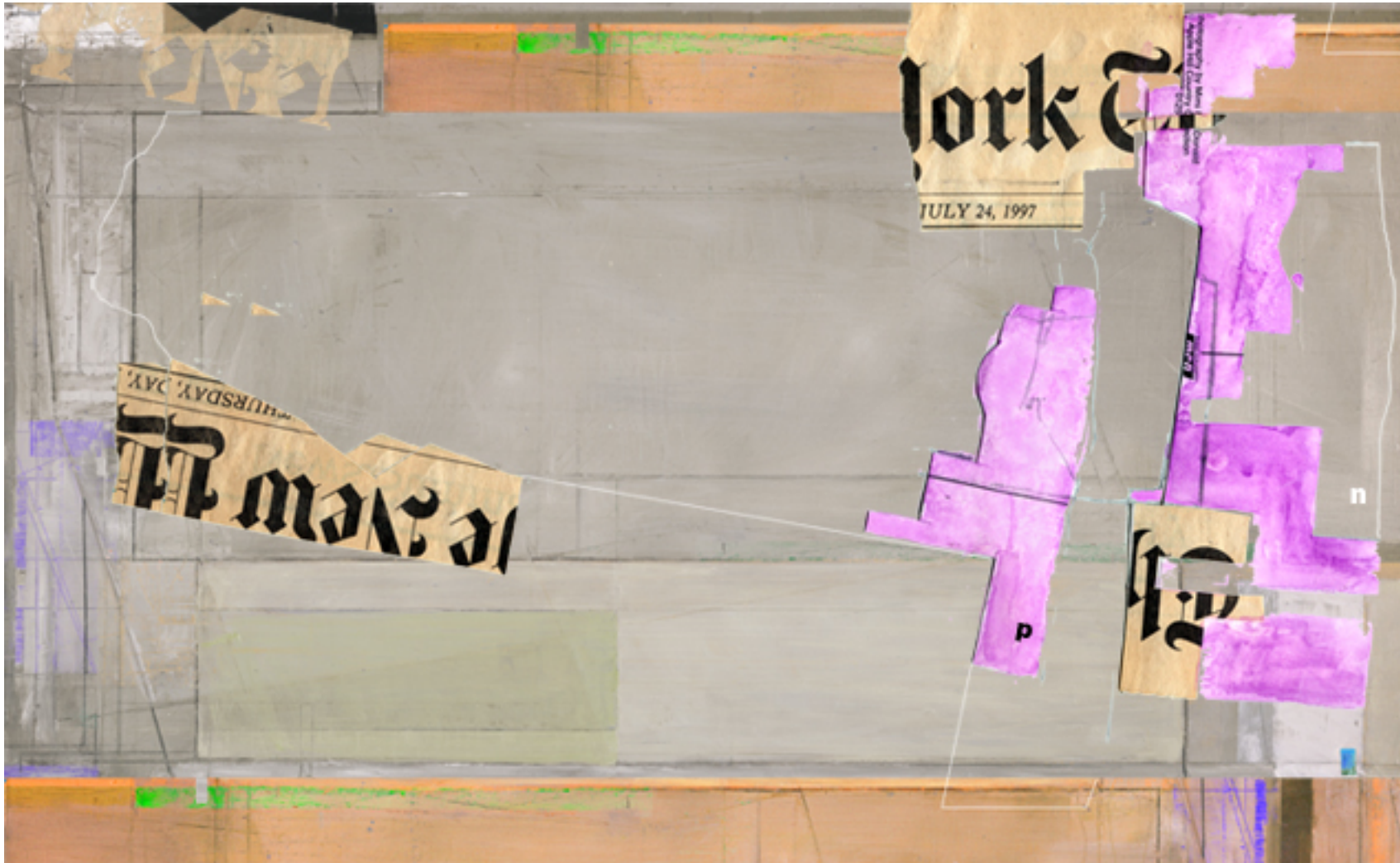
I see a puzzle master at work.

ADDENDUM: In my own way, I'm following suit, as in two landscapes shown below, part of a series that I call, "Jigsaw." Mondrian said, "Art is a game, and games have their rules." In these collages, I up the ante on the game of *space-making*. I use cut-figures (puzzle pieces) to define or imply space. Look at these pictures as you would a map—from above. In *JIGSAW No. 1*, for example, think of the magenta pieces and *The New York Times* pieces as buildings on a site plan, rural or urban. The pieces of these two interlocking systems (magenta pieces and *The New York Times* pieces) combine to define small, medium, large, and extra-large spaces: Rooms—outdoor rooms and indoor rooms—that's what I have in mind as I space-craft the design of these Jigsaw collages.

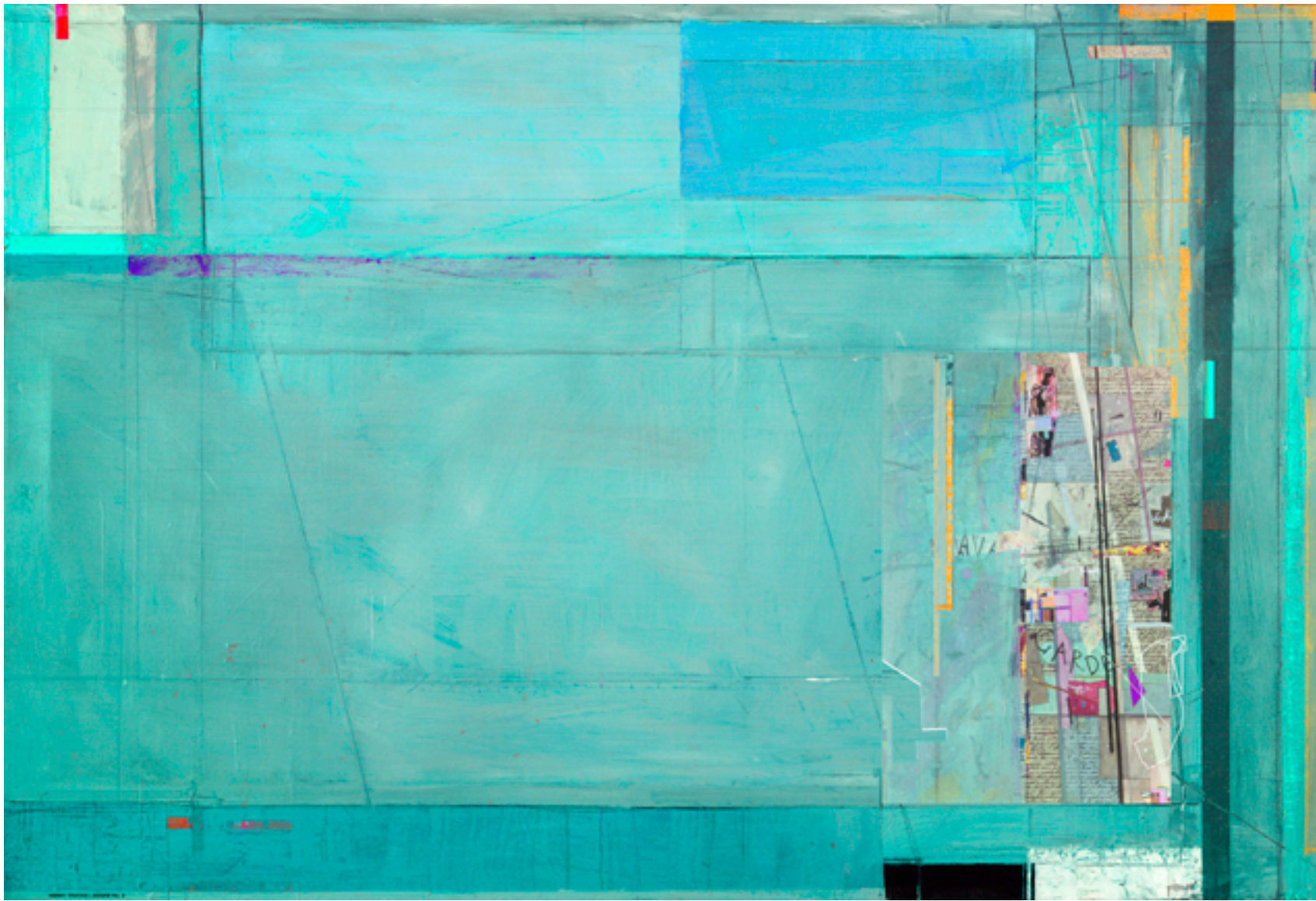
Look at the two pieces in *JIGSAW No. 1* that I've labeled "p" (positive) and "n" (negative), and you'll see that I, like Avery, have learned my Picasso lessons. Shift the positive piece upward to the right, and it snaps back into the place it came from—into the space it made when it broke free and shifted downward to the right. I call this shift the "Knight's Move," because the shift echoes the L-shape move of a knight in chess. (And evokes associations with Victor Shklovsky's book *Knight's Move*, in which the Russian literary theorist explored the nature of art, especially the complex relationship between form and content.)

Though I do so more subtly in *JIGSAW No. 2*, in both collages I break down the autonomy of objects. I erode shapes, dovetailing them with their surrounding. I break pieces apart and reposition them to create spaces between those pieces. I contrast congestion and decongestion, what's full and what's empty. I push object-like elements to the sides to create an open center. And if *JIGSAW No. 1* foregrounds the chess pieces, *JIGSAW No. 2* foregrounds the chessboard.

I could say a lot more about these pictures. But suffice to say: In these pictures, I make a jigsaw of space-defining shapes and form-defining spaces. I underscore the figural affinity and reciprocity between solids and voids—between positive objects and negative spaces. And I do all of this to express an underlying theme—an obsession: Architecture (art!) as space-definer no less than space-occupier.



JIGSAW No. 1, Jeffrey Hildner (aka Henry Trucks), 2012. Collage on canvas.



JIGSAW No. 2, Jeffrey Hildner (aka Henry Trucks), 2012. Collage on canvas.

FOOTNOTE: See my essay [SIGNIFICANT SPACE](#), where I point to the significance of Cézanne in this regard. Then compare the sky-shape that Cézanne created in *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from the Bibemus Quarry*, 1897, to the sky-shape that Avery created in *Green Sea*, 1954. In the Avery, even more than in the Cézanne, the sky-shape works in reciprocal harmony with the shapes around it. Avery's sky-shape interlocks with two other major shapes, forming a well-balanced trio that echo and rhyme: off-white sky, light brown hill, and green sea.

See also my my essay [SIGNIFICANT SPACE](#).
And my pamphlet [PICASSO LESSONS: The Sixth Woman of Les Femelles d'Avignon](#).
SIGNIFICANT SPACE: the product of a design in which FORM functions not only as SPACE-OCCUPIER, but also as SPACE-DEFINER.